

THE MEMOIRS
OF THE
LIFE OF EDWARD GIBBON

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

THE MEMOIRS
OF
EDWARD TILLY
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WITH VARIOUS OBSERVATIONS AND EXCURSIONS

BY HIMSELF

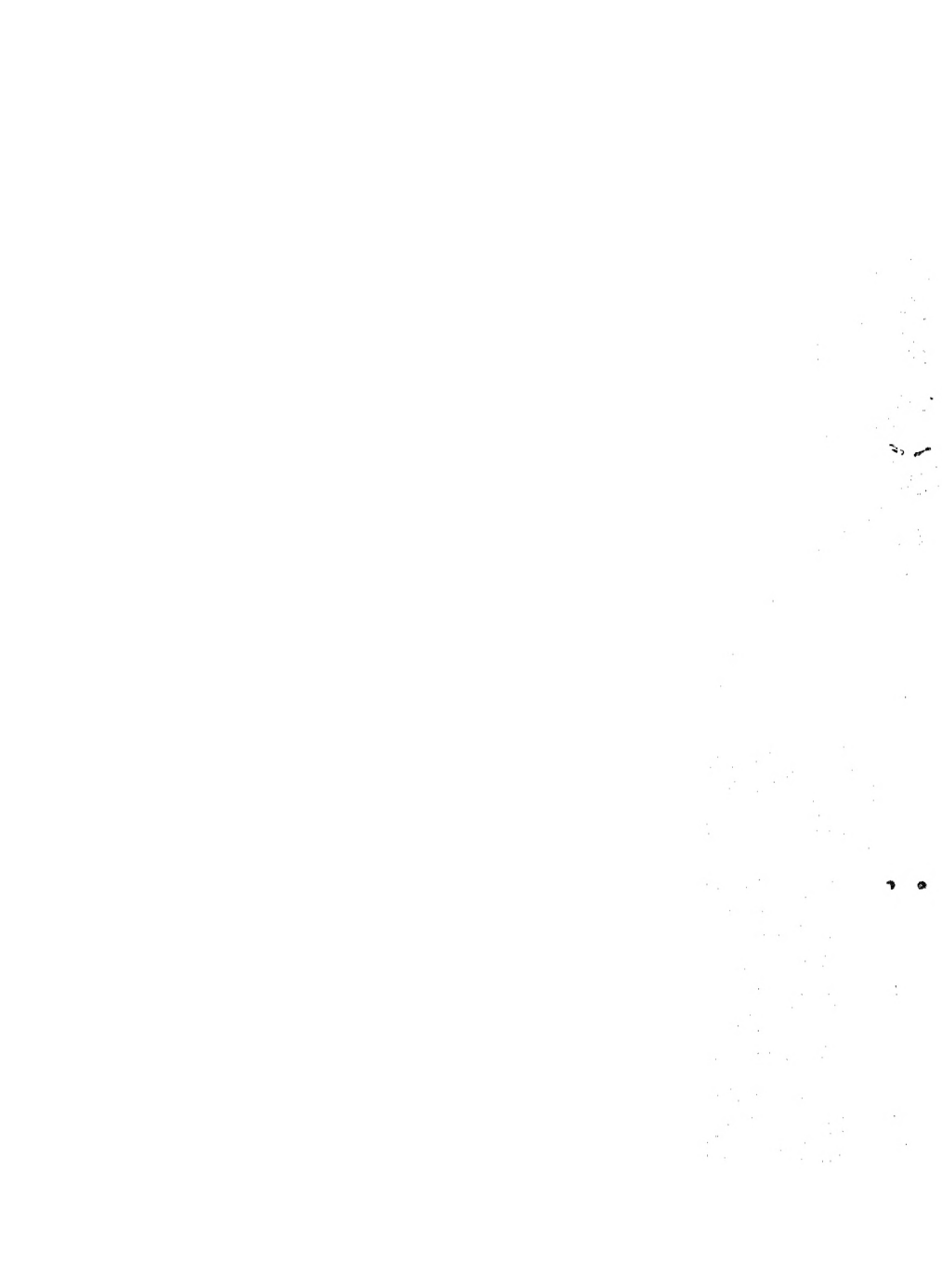
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METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET, W.C.
LONDON
. 1900



PREFACE

IF, as Johnson said, there had been only three books "written by man that were wished longer by their readers," the eighteenth century was not to draw to its close without seeing a fourth added. With *Don Quixote*, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*, the *Autobiography of Edward Gibbon* was henceforth to rank as "a work whose conclusion is perceived with an eye of sorrow, such as the traveller casts upon departing day". It is indeed so short that it can be read by the light of a single pair of candles; it is so interesting in its subject, and so alluring in its turns of thought and its style, that in a second and a third reading it gives scarcely less pleasure than in the first. Among the books in which men have told the story of their own lives it stands in the front rank. It is a striking fact that one of the first of autobiographies and the first of biographies were written in the same years. Boswell was still working at his *Life of Johnson* when Gibbon began those memoirs from which his autobiography, in the form in which it was given to the world, was so skilfully pieced together. But a short time had gone by since Johnson had said that "he did not think that the life of any literary man in England had been well written". That reproach against our writers he himself did much to lessen by his *Lives of Cowley and of Milton*, of *Dryden and of Pope*. It was finally removed by two members of that famous club which he had helped to found. However weak was the end of the eighteenth

century in works of imagination, in one great branch of literature it faded nobly away. Both in the *Life of Johnson* and in the *Autobiography of Edward Gibbon*, it "left something so written to after-times as they should not willingly let it die". Another hundred years have gone by. Many Englishmen since then have written their lives; of many Englishmen the lives have been written by others. Each of these books, in its own class, still remains without a rival. Of each of them it may still be said: "Eclipse is first, and the rest nowhere".

Admirable as is Gibbon's *Autobiography* in its present form, we cannot help speculating on the perfection which it might have attained had it been completed by the hands of the author. He was an accomplished artist, who both knew how to plan a stately temple, and how to give to every corner its utmost polish. Though he left his work imperfect, happily we have little need to exclaim with the poet:—

Ah, who can raise that wand of magic power,
Or the lost clue regain?
The unfinished window in Aladdin's tower
Unfinished must remain.

The six sketches of his life which he left, covering as they more or less did every part of it, excepting a year or two at the close, were in each one of these divisions so highly wrought that by a skilful editor they could be dovetailed into a single work which should show few traces of incompleteness. Judicious selection was what was most needed, for Gibbon in his different sketches often travelled over the same ground. In the main part of his task there seems nothing wanting. "The review of my moral and literary character," he wrote, "is the most interesting to myself and to the public." That review he left so nearly perfect that even he could have improved it but little.

Of the real merit of the autobiography his first editor, Lord Sheffield, shows an ignorance that seems strange indeed when we remember the skill with which he discharged his task. "It is to be lamented," he writes, "that all the sketches of the memoirs, except that composed in the form of annals, cease about twenty years before Mr. Gibbon's death; and consequently that we have the least detailed account of the most interesting part of his life." His lordship was misled by life's outward show and pomp. It was Gibbon in the splendour of his success, in the full blaze of the world, and not in the long and obscure stages of his growth that he wished to see portrayed. He loved to see his friend a member of Parliament and of the ministry, a writer of state papers, the companion of the most distinguished men at home or abroad, and basking in the warmth of his great reputation. This to him was the most interesting part of that unexampled life—this, which the great historian had in common with troops of famous men.

We may regret that Gibbon, when he had written his life, did not think it right "to amuse the reader with a gallery of portraits and a collection of anecdotes". To do so, as he tells us, "was most assuredly in his power". Admirable as they would have been in themselves, added to his autobiography, they would have lessened its perfection as a whole. Boswell boasts with justice that, in his *Life of Johnson*, "amidst a thousand entertaining and instructive episodes, the hero is never long out of sight". Scarcely for a single moment do we lose sight of the hero of the autobiography. It is the life of the author of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and his life alone, that we read from the first page to the last. If he opens his narrative with John Gibbon, the Marmorarius of King Edward III., it is still his own life that, in a certain sense,

he is describing, for "we seemed to have lived in the persons of our forefathers". That "ideal longevity" of the past belongs to him as much as the "ideal longevity" of the future, when "his mind will be familiar to the grandchildren of those who are yet unborn". If he describes his maiden aunt, and her great struggles against adversity, she it was whom he gratefully acknowledged as "the true mother of his mind". If he dwells at length on the fourteen months he spent at Oxford, and on the five years he spent "on the banks of the Lemane Lake," it was "to the fortunate banishment which placed him at Lausanne that the fruits of his education must be ascribed". His service in the militia could not be passed over in a brief paragraph, for however much "the reader may smile, the captain of the Hampshire Grenadiers has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire". The seat he held for some years in the House of Commons was worthy of notice, for there he found a "school of civil prudence, the first and most essential virtue of an historian".

With the publication of the last volume of his history he felt his public life was complete. For himself, indeed, there still remained, he fondly hoped, a long "autumnal felicity," happier by far than his boyhood and his youth, happier, perhaps, even than those "twenty happy years, animated by the labours of his history," to which he owed that consciousness of high merit and that great fame which were the very breath of his nostrils. Of this part of his life the outside world need know nothing. He had shown them how a great historian was made. How he rested when once his long day's work was done, how he enjoyed himself, with what great men he lived, what he heard among them and what he saw—however interesting all this might be in itself, it formed no chapter in "the review of his moral and literary character". It is this

self-restraint of the consummate artist, this wise reticence that gives us an almost perfect picture of a great scholar in a work that can easily be read through at a single sitting.

Mark Pattison joins Gibbon with Milton as two men "who are indulged without challenge in talk about themselves". In each "the gratification of self-love, which attends all autobiography, is felt to be subordinated to a nobler end". "It is his office," as poet or historian, "and not himself, which he magnifies." He who had written the *Decline and Fall* had a right to tell the world how he had been prepared for his great task. He was, it is true, a vain man, foolishly vain in the opinion he entertained of his ridiculous person, but of this kind of vanity there are few traces to be discovered in his autobiography. There is pride enough, unveiled consciousness of high desert, "a lofty and steady confidence in himself". This is not indeed displayed with Milton's noble and severe dignity. It is the pride of a great man who has worn a periwig all his life. If now and then we smile at the manner in which it is set forth, nevertheless we admit his claim.

"Sume superbiam
Quæsitam meritis."

We the more readily forgive his pride from the pleasure we take in reading his account of the formation of the strong character by which it was justified. There is a strange remark of Lowell's, where, speaking of "that element of manhood which, for want of a better name, we call character," he continues: "It is something distinct from genius, though all great geniuses are endowed with it. Hence we always think of Dante Alighieri, of Michael Angelo, of Will. Shakespeare, of John Milton, while of such men as Gibbon and Hume we merely recall the works, and think of them as the author of this and